CHAPTER V
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MAN AND RELIGION

Universality, Social service, practice of religion and transformation of the human individual, is the goal of religion ... These lessons have a purpose, a validity, a relevance even today. It is not merely the people of India that require these lessons. The whole world today is passing through a crucible of doubt; everywhere there is conflict between faith and doubt, between conviction on the one side and lack of conviction on the other. They are testings of men's faith, and if we are to get over the present crisis and lift the world to a better sphere, it is essential for us to adopt religion as a human transformation resulting in social transformation.¹

Faith in Religion

Is Bhabani Bhattacharya a rationalist? Or is he a theist or an agnostic? — These questions baffle the readers and critics who attempt to discuss and evaluate Bhattacharya's beliefs in religion because

complex man as he is, Bhattacharya lends himself to opposing viewpoints.

At one level, Bhattacharya seems to be an iconoclast. The English-speaking townsmen's words in "Pilgrims in Uniform" 2:

Tell me, why should gay-living villains sit above you and let money flow like water, while all the time you honest folk have not enough to stop your hunger? Call this God's justice? Why does the All-Merciful write one thing on the rich money lender's brow and another on yours? Why do your innocent rickety children die before they have lived? What sort of God is He who has created this sorry scheme of things which brings misery to the good people of the soil, while the evil parasitic ones of so many types thrive and have best of times? 3

Or Viswanath's desperate and pathetic but meaningful words in He Who Rides a Tiger:

In this land of thousand and one gods why is there such devilry and such misery? ... I worshipped the gods like any one else. I loved them. I feared them. And what happened? ... Only tell

2"Pilgrims in Uniform" is a short story by Bhattacharya which appears in the collection, Steel Hawk and other stories (New Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1968), pp. 115-126.

3Ibid., pp. 115-16.
me why did my little grandchild have to
die of hunger? Would you blame a three-
year-old girl for not having faith? 4

Or Jayadev’s angry words to his mother when his wife
is about to sacrifice blood to the goddess in a nearby
temple at the instigation of his mother:

We’re fighting the false clayfoot gods.
They’ve had their day and now they must
quit. 5

— these may be cited and interpreted as Bhattacharya’s
voice to show that Bhattacharya is interested in up-
rooting the people’s faith in God and religion.

At another level, Bhattacharya seems to be
an agnostic, showing indifference to God and religion
and regarding them purely as a matter of private con-
science. To validate this stand the following examples
may be cited. Mohini prepared herself to cut her bosom
and offer blood in a lotus-petal to the presiding deity
in a local shrine to beget a son, not knowing that she
is already pregnant; Halo creates a fake temple by
performing a trick and makes the people worship the

4He Who Rides a Tiger, pp. 115-16
5Music for Mohini, p. 203
false image of god installed in that temple: and the worshippers offer milk baths to the image of god for selfish motives. These episodes which are presented in an ironic way may suggest Bhattacharya's scant respect for God and religion. If Prabhakar Machwe considers Bhattacharya's novels "purely non-spiritualistic novels," 6 K.K. Sharma considers Bhattacharya as one who does not have "astonishing philosophical depths." 7 This view is quite possible because Bhattacharya does not seem to commit himself to any stand and his very detachment posits such a viewpoint.

Professor Shimer, who had the opportunity of personal contact and relationship with Bhattacharya feels that it is very difficult to probe the mind of Bhattacharya as regards his attitude toward religion. In one of her letters she writes that she has not discussed religion as such with Bhattacharya and that we have to depend solely on his writings, which again present no definite clue. She writes:

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When we look to his novels for clues as to B.B.'s [Bhabani Bhattacharya's] own philosophy, it seems to me we are not on sure grounds; so much of what he says in terms of characters and situation may be said 'tongue in cheek' or to be taken satirically or ironically. 8

This difficulty arises because of Bhattacharya's detached and non-committed attitude and because, in his earlier novels religion is not discussed much. Excepting his latest novel, A Dream in Hawaii, all his other novels do not give much importance to religion though the spiritual aspects are touched upon here and there incidentally. In other words, religion does not form an integral part of the mosaic of the entire structure of those novels. For example, So Many Hungers is concerned with political freedom and the people's hunger for food, sex, money etc. In Music for Mohini, the basic theme is social renaissance, though it throws light on problems like false faith, superstitious beliefs as seen in the Hindu religion. He Who Rides a Tiger is mainly a protest against the caste-system, but also touches on the strength and weakness of religious practices. If A Goddess Named Gold is an

8 Prof. Shimer's letter to me from Hawaii dated August 19, 1977.
explication of the right way of using political freedom, Shadow from Ladakh is a strong plea for blending the old and the new, the ancient and the modern. These novels could be considered as purely non-spiritualistic novels as Prabhatkar Machwe does. There is a valid reason as to why Bhattacharya should have cared more for temporal aspects than spiritual aspects in his earlier novels. Bhattacharya has simply believed in Swami Vivekananda's words "Religion is not for empty bellies." It was precisely for this reason that Bhattacharya has given more thought to material aspects in man's life in all his earlier novels. But at the same time, a careful and in-depth study reveals that Bhattacharya is not against religion but against religiosity.

In the novels dealing with Indian situations and themes, the fundamental necessity of religion in life is taken for granted - since Indian culture is saturated with religion. It is when he sets his last novel in the West that the religious hunger in the occident is sharply brought out. A Dream in Hawaii affirms, beyond doubt, Bhattacharya's faith in religion.

and the necessity for having faith. It would, therefore, appear that Bhattacharya is a theist, having firm faith in God and religion. What he attacks in his novels which otherwise may be construed as anti-religious or agnosticism, is not religion but mere religiosity. He is pained to see that people are enamoured of religiosity rather than religion, the trappings rather than the spirit. And therefore his attack on religiosity must, be construed as an effort to show the people how they have gone astray from understanding the basic truths and following them.

Mrs. Indrani Mikerjee, Bhattacharya’s daughter, lends a supporting hand to this premise. As observed by Bhattacharya: “My daughter has told you about some of my personal beliefs in the area of religion”, 10 Mrs. Indrani Mikerjee said with great conviction:

My father is a firm believer in God. To him there is only one God whatever name by which he is called. As you said, he is not against God or religion; but certainly against profanity of religion by reducing it to mere rituals and arid pujapaths. 11

10 Bhattacharya’s letter to me from Calcutta dated Feb 29, 1980 — vide Appendix.
11 My meeting with Mrs. Indrani Mikerjee at her apartment in Calcutta dated February 15, 1980.
These words of Mrs. Indrani Mukerjee lend a clue to understand and evaluate Bhattacharya's concept of religion. With all his early respect for Marxist principles, Bhattacharya started his literary career giving more importance to material aspects in life, but as years went by, he began to feel more and more the necessity for spiritual nourishment in a man's life. The more mature he became in his outlook on life, the greater was his belief that religion plays an integral part in the welfare of man. His growing wisdom and particularly his stay at Honolulu – as a Senior Specialist at the East-West Center, Hawaii – showed him that mere material prosperity – political security, economic stability and welfare – would not suffice for a man to lead a full life in the here and how; and that spiritual aspects should also be taken into consideration – which idea finds its fullest expression in A Dream in Hawaii.

Need for Spiritual Nourishment

Modern science with all its advanced technology providing all earthly comforts to man, and the growing accent on the modern concept of liberty, equality and fraternity, have offered modern man economic
prosperity, stability and all other earthly comforts in life. But they have failed to help man find a meaning or answer to life. The result is disenchantment in the Great Society and man’s fretful attempt to fill in the vacuum. Even in the most advanced country, where people have practically everything, they want, there is an increasingly felt need for spiritual nourishment in life, which nourishment, they believe, could fill in the vacuum created by the modern life style. Bhattacharya was able to discern this when he stayed at Honolulu for a few years. This stay enabled him not only to understand the American way of life but also proved to be a revelation. He was simply overwhelmed by the people’s relentless quest for self-fulfilment which, they believed, could be achieved by feeding the inner man. That was why there was and is so much demand for the visiting Indian Gurus and Swamijis. Commenting on the Americans’ response to lectures and meditation classes conducted by Indian Gurus and Swamijis, Bhattacharya observes:

The place was packed with young people, sitting in the aisles, standing at the rear. Their faces displayed their hunger for spiritual nourishment. 12

12Shimer, p. 21.
And this theme becomes one of the major threads - in fact the most prominent one - in the texture of his latest novel, *A Dream in Hawaii*. Commenting on the core concern of this novel, Bhattacharya observes:

> The core concern of the story is the current disenchantment in the Great Society and the intense, fretful strivings to find an answer to one's life, to find the path of one's self-fulfilment.  

True to his remark, Bhattacharya presents in that novel the Americans - especially of the younger generation - interested in feeding the inner man. Swami Yogananda's discourses on Indian Vedantic concepts are well attended by many. He says:

> Anyway, the largest auditorium on the campus was overfull, its seven hundred seats taken, people sitting on the floor and standing in the aisles.

Again talking about another session he says: "The hall was packed to capacity. There was only standing room for latescomers."  

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13 *Shimer*, p. 21.
14 *A Dream in Hawaii*, p. 4.
The attention paid to Swami Yogananda's lectures is astounding, worthwhile to note:

The audience had placidly watched Swami Yogananda's appearance on the platform along with the Chairman, Professor Dodwell. True to Indian custom, the Swami remained seated when he delivered his address. Not using any notes, he went on almost without any pause for two hours, the words pouring like water in a sunlit cataract. Silence continued in the hall even when his voice had come to a final stop. Then the listeners, as if wakening from a daze, broke into response. Rapturous! Fading off briefly, growing anew. 16

There is also perfect human communication between the speaker and the audience.

Two weeks went by before the Amphitheater began to get packed, people sitting even on the grey cement floor between the benches and the platform. But it was not the number that mattered. Intercommunication was at first slow. The youngest people were hesitant, self-conscious. Their mood changed. They began to accept the speaker and felt free to open their hearts. He /Swami Yogananda/ ceased to be an alien. He merged himself in the listeners and they merged into him. He grew with them into depths of understanding, soul-searching. They grew with him likewise. 17

16 A Dream in Hawaii, pp. 7-8.
17 Ibid., pp. 178-79.
Such a general response for getting spiritual nourishment is quite understandable and even justifiable because all the most important characters in that novel feel the need for spiritual nourishment which alone could help them to find a meaning in or answer to life. For example, Jennifer, a rich young Socialite seeks the help of Swami Yogamanda. She feels

He /Swami Yogamanda/ could give her life a direction, a meaning. He could show her how to be free from the void, she had been trying to fill....

Again Stella, a Ph.D. Student in Hinduism, who feels a revulsion for the kind of completely uninhibited four letter orgiastic sex, demanded by her husband, Walt Gregson, turns to Swami Yogamanda: Bhattacharya says:

How account for her interest in his /Swami Yogamanda's/ visit? For that matter, how explain Stella's interest? It could be that both were motivated by the current lostness in American life, acutely felt but hardly comprehended. Yellow-robed men from the East held out the bright promise of inner adjustment and peace: a promise that dramatized their appearance on the Western scene as an advent.

18 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 42.
19 Ibid., p. 50.
Walt Greffson, who is out and out a non-spiritualist, who believes that sex alone matters in life and who has a strong conviction that the bed is "a key symbol for the new American, the American of the century's seventh decade" 20 is also moving towards spirituality, though not aware of it. To these, we may add, Devjani who seeks self-fulfilment through spirituality:

How puzzled and even worried she grew at a strange discovery: within her was a hunger for spiritual life: A hunger of which she had been totally unaware. All her life of twenty years had been built with things material. This new impulse could not be ascribed to genes: nor to environment. And the impulse was growing all too fast - it was taking her breath away! 21

Thus by presenting the yearning of the people for the spiritual content in life, Bhattacharya demonstrates his conviction that man does not live by bread alone: and that he needs food for his hungry soul too. In other words material aspects and spiritual aspects are complementary in man's life and in preference to one, the other should not be neglected.

20 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 24.
21 Ibid., p. 87.
A Dream in Hawaii serves as a pointer to validate this. Two value systems are brought into a clash. At one end we have materialism while at the other end we have spiritualism. Bhattacharya's final message, "one cannot exist without the other" is dexterously worked out in terms of two principal characters, Swami Yogananda and Walt Gregson, who at the beginning of the novel stand poles apart.

Neeloy Mookherji is a young teacher of philosophy in an Indian University, who, by the cumulative effect of his own spiritual hunger, and who, at the suggestion of his student, Devjani, whom he admires and loves secretly, becomes a yogi. Popular soon, this teacher-turned yogi, Swami Yogananda sets up an ashram at Rishikesh and attracts a large number of disciples, native and foreign. Stella, the American tourist, becomes an ardent admirer of his and at her request, he goes to America to give discourses on Eastern Philosophy - "to present Universal Religion in its Vedantic concept". In America his lectures are well attended and very soon he becomes

22 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 245.
23 Ibid., p. 144.
a much-sought Guru providing spiritual nourishment to the Americans who feel they have lost their moorings. One Dr. Vincent Swift, the prototype of the twentieth century Culture-Vulture begins to associate himself with Swami Yogananda and persuades him, of course with great effort to found in Hawaii a World Center for Yoga - an institution to rival the Hare Krishna Movement and Transcendental Movement which have already established firm roots in America. While the details are being worked out and steps taken to build the World Center on a massive scale, Swami Yogananda is racked by doubts about his sanctified persons for he is unable to forget and therefore to root out from his mind his intense love for Devjani, who is now in Hawaii as a research student at the East-West Center. While so many people have so much of faith in Swami Yogananda and in his relentless quest for "reality behind the appearances which are were may, the stuff of illusion", Walt Gregson, a votary of sexual permissiveness, suspecting Swami Yogananda's seeming detachment and celibacy uses his mistress Sylvia Koo to awaken the dormant, deep-buried sexual desires of Swami Yogananda. When he is half-asleep and only half-conscious, Swami Yogananda finds

24 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 8.
Sylvia beside him and taking her to be Devjani, caresses her. Back to his normal self, the next moment, Swami Yogananda rejects Sylvia and takes a decisive step to discard the yellow robe, so that he could be true to himself. He says to Devjani:

You have to know the truth. Swami Yogananda has ceased to exist. This man you see is Neeloy Mookherji. The yellow garb he still has to wear must be discarded. 25

To the surprise of all, he leaves America by the next flight, so that back in India he could be Neeloy, just Neeloy, again.

If Swami Yogananda discards the yellow-robe to participate in life as a normal man, there is in Walt Gregson a different change. As observed earlier Walt, who is a thorough-going materialist and who has the courage to discuss with Swami Yogananda, the need for pure materialistic outlook on life, moves from materialism to spiritualism. Though he is quite unaware of an inward change in himself, he is slowly moving towards the realisation of the spiritual aspects in life.

25 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 232.
At the end of the novel, it almost becomes an obsession with him and he begins to feel it. The novelist records it thus:

His awakening to a new facet of his personal problem - that alone could be meaningful ... He sat up in bed, thinking. And out of the chaos of contrary thoughtways a strange conviction was taking shape: despite all his bitter challenge he himself was in deeply felt personal need of Swami Yogananda! ... Presently he moved out of bed and started to dress. In a few minutes he was in his car, driving fast on the way to the airport. He had to take a last look at Swami Yogananda. Or, at his plane as it became airborne. His last salute, his final homage. 26

At last Walt has understood and felt the need for spiritual nourishment in life.

By presenting this reversal of attitude to life Bhattacharya vindicates his firm conviction that man should exclude neither the spiritual claims nor the physical claims of the body. His idea - final message - is conveyed thus:

Would the spiritual accept the needs of materiality? Would the material make room for what was beyond its calculations of demand and supply? 27

26 A Dream in Hawaii, pp. 243-44
27 Ibid., p. 144.
The answer that Bhattacharya suggest by implication is for fair adjustment or a balance of these two aspects in life. In other words, Bhattacharya is not for complete negation of life or for too much indulgence or participation. Imbued with the spirit of the ancient Indian thought and value system Bhattacharya opines that man is a composite being, part animal and part spirit. The purpose of his life is to realise the spirit in him and to make his animal nature subordinate to it. Hinduism, a major and dominant religion in India accepts asceticism which looks upon body as the enemy of the spirit and which seeks to control and direct all desires of flesh. Far from looking upon body as the enemy of the spirit, the body is the instrument of the spirit. The Gita in a hundred different places recognizes the forces of nature in man and teaches that these should be sublimated into spiritual habits. The whole discipline of the graded "Asramas" - student, householder, anchorite, and mystic - and the mention of 'Artha' or wealth and 'Kama' or gratification of legitimate desire in the well-known Hindu formula "Dharmartha Kamanoksha" shows conclusively that Hindu sages did not ignore the claims of the body.
Bhattacharya's interest in men is so telling that he is not prepared to exclude religion from the domain of human interest. But even in matter of religion, he could measure all values and actions only in relation to human personality. And that is why he does not accept the preference of the 'otherworld' or 'other lives to come' to this life in the here and now. Bhattacharya's primary concern is: can religion be of help to man to establish a dynamic equilibrium in the art of living in the here and now. Where religion does this, he finds a place for religion.

Again, as Bhattacharya measures all values and actions in religion only in relation to human personality, his religion is more man-centred than god-centred. In other words, what Bhattacharya expects out of religion is now best it could help man in establishing the necessary intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, paving the way for self-fulfilment. In one of his articles "The Nature of Wisdom" Bhattacharya observes:

What gives the Gita its own individuality is its strong insistence on the establishment of a dynamic equilibrium in the art of living. That equilibrium is essential
in both intrapersonal and interpersonal relationship, and is the way to self-fulfilment. Man has to complete his inner image through the work that is specifically his mission in-life, the work he is born to do. He has to be true to his own inner image at any cost, in material terms or in terms of struggle - that is the core, the ultimate meaning of 'religion', and all else is illusion.28

And Bhattacharya believes in religion contributing its share to these most important aspects in man's life. To put it more specifically, religion should and does help man at his personal and social levels.

Intrapersonal Level

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' - so says the Holy Bible. To Bhattacharya the thought on God is the beginning of a new life to a few for it warrants self-criticism, paving the way for change in heart. Sinners are purified and thus redeemed from the lower instincts. In one of his short stories "Pilgrims in Uniform, "Bhattacharya demonstrates this idea. A brief

narration of the story is worthwhile here.

Ram Lal, a thief, posing himself as a devotee, travels along with a band of devotees to the temple of Jagannath to witness the famous car festival. But his real intention is to rob the devotees when they are asleep. Bhargava, the leader of the devotees speaks about the glories of the temple at Jagannath and explains to them how the devotees who are pure in heart see and perceive the Lord in the shrine while the others with evil intention in their hearts see only gold and other ornaments and not God. 29 This remark touches the heart of Ram Lal and he is racked by the qualms of his conscience and he begins to feel uneasy. His uneasiness is thus spelt out.

His heart hammered. Something was hurting him in his inmost depths... Beneath this stream of conscious thought, surged an under-stream, spurring up through some emotional crevice in fountains of joy. Ram Lal felt rather than visualised the car festival. 30

29 We are reminded of Jesus Christ's 'Sermon on the Mount': "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God", The Holy Bible, (The Authorised Version), "St. Matthew", Chapter 5, Vs. 8.

30 "Pilgrims in Uniform", p. 120.
There is a change in his heart. Thus purified he redeems himself from his lower instincts.

He sat down and wept in silence. Presently he felt relieved, as though he was rid of a crushing burden within his breast. He felt strangely purified.

While this story proves beyond doubt Bhattacharya's implicit faith in the essential goodness in man, - in his capacity for self-criticism and correction - it also suggests that the idea of God acts as an instrument for self-correction and redemption. One more instance to validate this. In *A Dream in Hawaii*, Bhattacharya describes how Vishnu Narayan, a staunch and active member of the Hare Krishna Movement, is saved from counter culture through the use of drugs. Vishnu Narayan's confession goes thus:

Vishnu Narayan paused in his narration, savoring the wonder of it of all, his eyes turning to the days of his own conversion. How miraculous was his rescue from drug counter culture! How fast was his rise to a higher level of life!

Sometimes religion brings solace to a bruised soul. That is why Bhargava defending the Townsman's

31 "Pilgrims in Uniform", pp. 120-21.
32 *A Dream in Hawaii*, p. 76.
remark that religion is opium, says:

It is not that kind of opium that hurts,
It only makes us happy. We have something
to cling to when we are in misery. 33

This idea finds a place in He Who Rides a Tiger.
Worship even in a false temple with a false image can
be of a help to a dedicated worshipper bringing solace
and peace of mind and aiding the growth of mental
powers through concentration. Chandraleka is fully
aware of the fraud behind the founding of the temple
wherein she is soon to be installed as the Mother of
Seven-Fold Bliss. But yet she seeks refuge in its
rituals when her lover Bitem leaves her. The novelist
spells out the questions agitating her mind thus:

Would the temple bring her peace? Would
her piety be no less potent than Brahmanic
invocation, investing the stone with mean-
ing, transmuting falsehood into truth? 34

Presently a series of miraculous things happen to her.
There comes one day an aged mendicant seeking the
Mother of Seven-Fold Bliss and as soon as he sees

33 "Pilgrims in Uniform", p. 117.
34 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 193.
Chandraleka he rushes towards her, prostrates himself before her and begins to chant:

Thou who art the secret breath in all created beings: Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail! 35

A week later a similar thing happens with a saffron clad ascetic woman. To these, we may add a young handsome man, the son of a millionaire becoming a yogi. He arrives in his big car and as soon as he sees Chandraleka, he announces his decision to renounce home and parents and become a yogi. These episodes reveal clearly that Chandraleka has undergone a spiritual transformation and has become sanctified.

All religions insist on meditation and concentration to increase one's power of thought, which in turn helps to view things at a deeper level and sometimes perceive beauty even in ugly things. Bhargava's narration of the story of Sri Chaitanya and his visit to the Jagannath temple illustrates the power of thought. In fact, "Jagannath has a shape without proportion, with stumps for hands, so dark, and the face altogether

35He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 196.
blank," 36 but Sri Chaitanya is able to perceive divine loveliness in the image. The narration of which goes thus:

He [Sri Chaitanya] beheld and was intoxicated with the divine loveliness. He left the temple and went to bathe in the sea, and in the dark hued water his beauty-haunted eyes beheld the dark visage of the Lord Himself. He stretched out his arms: he, the strange lover, called the Lord by fond names. The waves tossed upon him and caressed him and they rocked him and carried his away. Such is the power of beauty. Yet Jagannath has no beauty of shape or face. His is an ungainly image. Jagannath has made his outward form ungainly, as if to say, "The exterior, the shell, does not count. The within alone has value." 37

"Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram — Truth, Goodwill and Beauty" 38 — this seems to be the quest of the ancient Hindus. The quest is a desirable one for it is directed to acquiring desirable virtues. Gandhiji equated truth with God; Goodwill helps a man in his social life, and Beauty gives man bliss. The possession of these aspects is worth aiming at.

36 "Pilgrims in Uniform", p. 118.
37 Ibid., p. 117.
38 "Music for Mahini", p. 220.
Interpersonal Relationships

While religion does so much of good to the individual concerned it also helps man to establish a satisfactory interpersonal relationship. One of the aspects is reminding man of his social obligations—showing love and compassion for the meek and lowly. Modern Christianity would rather insist on seeing a need and meeting it with suitable actions. The main purpose of the Christian missionaries founding hospitals, and schools is service to the people and uniting them in a closer circle of fellowship. Greatly absorbed by this idea of social obligation of religion, Bhattacharya shows in He Who Rides a Tiger, how religion could be an instrument for alleviating the miseries of the people especially at times of great calamity, like famine. The "Milk Bath" episode in He Who Rides a Tiger suggests this point. Viswanath, a true humanist creates a storm in the temple by one of his acts. Performing the ceremony of the "Milk Bath" to the image of god is a custom in the temple where Viswanath is working. According to the custom and usage the milk that has been used for ritual bath given to the image is collected and poured into the sacred river the Ganga.
But Viswanath cleverly manages to steal the milk after
the bath is over and distributes it after boiling it
to the destitute children in the neighbourhood who are
dying of slow starvation at the time of the Bengal
famine. When this is detected it is considered as a
great offence and sin and it is brought to the notice
of Kalo, the chief dignitary in the temple. A furore
is created by the trustees and the milk donors. They
demand the immediate dismissal of Viswanath and pre-
vention of any such thing in the future. They argue
that if Mother Ganga is denied her daily food and
deprived of her legitimate share, she will be unhappy
and feel insulted. But Kalo's mind works with Viswanath.
He feels that there is no need to waste the milk by
pouring it into the river; instead it could serve a
real purpose - feeding the hungry destitutes. Very
cleverly he argues thus:

Wait, does your mother eat while you go
hungry? Is not Ganga insulted if milk
is poured into her water when her children
lie on her banks slowly dying of starva-
tion... we must see in Ganga a true, living
mother. 39

Kalo is able to prevail over them and manages to convince the donors for the distribution of the milk to the hungry children after the "milk bath" is over. Kalo is satisfied: "The milk is not being wasted. It serves its full purpose." 40 This episode reminds us of Jesus Christ's words:

... I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

... Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. 41

Participation in religious rites — of course with a clear understanding of the meaning and significance of it — has its own value and importance. The Upanishads speak about this as 'participation mystique'. What it stresses is not mere participation as a matter of fact, routine or fashion but a meaningful participation. Bhattacharya's short story "Pilgrims in Uniform" throws a good deal of light on this score.

40 *The Tiger and the Mouse*, p. 129.

41 *The Holy Bible* (The Authorized Version), "St Matthew", Chapter 25, vs. 35, 36 and 40.
A brief description of the devotees' pilgrimage to the Jagannath temple is worthwhile here.

Bhargava, a priestly novitiate at the historic temple of Jagannath sets out on his customary annual tour, a month before the car festival collecting a band of devotees to whom the pilgrimage is really a worthwhile experience and a temporary release from their daily routines.

Peasants' souls were like thirsty rock. Life held no enchantment, and the novitiate brought the prospect of release. You could shake off the earth ties for a while, forget the hungers and the fears and the ever present emotional strain for ten days of supreme all-effacing bliss when you lived in the flesh yet were out of it, when you were no longer a peasant but a pilgrim.42

Garbed in saffron clothes which draw them all together in a closer circle of brotherhood — "tended to make them as it were monolithic" 43 — these devotees eagerly listened to Bhargava's description of the glories of the holy city and its deity of deities, and repeat mantras after him parrot-wise. As they repeat the

42Pilgrims in Uniform", pp. 113-14
43Ibid., p. 114.
words, their hearts put their own new meaning into the unknown Sanskrit words and the words light up and burn "with oil of devotees' emotions, thus achieving a purpose never to be attained by a mere intellectual grasp of the text." 44 After an encounter with a fellow passenger, an English speaking townsman, Bhargava affirms that only people with pure heart can see the Lord. Here is the description of Ram Lal visualising the Car Festival.

Half a million pilgrims tug at the ropes lengthening out from the wheel-base of an enormous chariot. Their combined strength moves the sixteen - wheeled wooden house, inch by inch. Once in a while the pilgrims pause, lift their eyes to the deity and cry out in sheer ecstasy. 45

To this we may add the idea of equality and tolerance that religion stresses. In the presence of God, all are equal and God is for all. This is another conviction of Bhattacharya. Bhargava, representing Bhattacharya's voice, says:

There is no caste in the Lord's shrine, brothers. All men are equal. The Brahmin and the Untouchable sit together at the Market of Joy and eat from the same bowl. The Lord is there not the brahmin, aloeof in the dignity of learning, not for the

44 "Pilgrims in Uniform", pp. 114-15
45 Ibid., p. 120.
devotee, pure-minded, God-conscious, true-knowing. He is there for the ignorant and the ignoble, for the lowly in spirit, the bruised in body and soul, the polluted, the thief. 46

Because of its social function - preaching equality and humanitarianism, - Bhattacharya has the greatest admiration for Chaitanya's 'Bhakti Movement' which later on flowered into 'Hare, Krishna Movement', now very popular in America in this century. Commenting on this Movement Bhattacharya says:

The movement becomes casteless, equalitarian, permitting no distinction between man and man. That was Mahaprabhu Chaitanya's basic contribution to India's value system. 47

His admiration for Chaitanya's Movement is so great that Bhattacharya devotes a separate chapter for it in his book **Glimpses of Indian History**. In this essay, titled 'Chaitanya and his Movement', Bhattacharya observes:

Its casteless, equalitarian ideals built a bridge over social gulf. Further, it gave a softness, a romantic dream-atmosphere, to the Hindu religion which had been hardening, freezing into the Tantric way. 48

46 "Pilgrims in Uniform", p. 119.
47 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 76.
"The brother anointing" ceremony in *Music for Mohini*, also serves this point. The religious ceremony in which Mohini anoints little Ratan and many other boys as her brothers serves the purpose of giving colour to life and evokes tender fraternal feelings.

Attack on Religiosity

When religion does so much of good to man in his personal and social life, Bhattacharya is pained to see that nowadays religion is being reduced to mere rituals and arid pujapaths. In other words what we see in many a holy mansion is mockery of religion and not religion. This has happened to all religions. In *A Dream in Hawaii*, Swami Yogananda says:

> All through the history of civilizations every spiritual system had attracted to it an aura of corruption, an enveloping vapor which threatened to suffocate the system itself. It had happened in a big way to Buddhism. It had happened to Christianity. 49

It had happened to Hinduism also. That is why Jayadev, representing Bhattacharya's voice says:

49 *A Dream in Hawaii*, p. 113
What... had happened to the ancient quest of the Hindus, the quest for Satyam, Shyam, Sundaram - Truth, Goodwill and Beauty? The core, the spiritual content, had been choked by centuries of evil overgrowth. Misguided faith burned like a great lamp of oil that gave little light but a good deal of smoke.

That is why Bhattacharya is interested in drawing the attention of the readers through his artistic medium to the misguided faith, the evil overgrowth, fanaticism, dogmaticism, misuse of God's name, false faiths which have crept in into the religion, destroying the lofty ideals of religion itself:

In He Who Rides a Tiger we have a few episodes which throw light on Bhattacharya's critical reactions to certain aspects of the Hindu religion. Kalo's trick and the eager expectation with which the miracle is expected by the assembled people reveal that credulity and faith in miracles still hold sway. Even though the country is so advanced with modern science and technology and with the modern inquiring spirit, people seem to believe in miracles such as the image of God emerging from the earth. Also, Bhattacharya

50 *Music for Mahini*, p. 220
presents a strange contradiction; while destitute
die of slow starvation without anyone lifting his
little finger to save them, money and material are
promptly offered, each competing with the other for
the construction of a fake temple. Not that there
is any kind of religious awakening or real religious
fervour but simply for the sake of its elaborate
rituals and puja-path. In other words, what people
show is religiosity, not always caring for its spirit.
Bhattacharya brings out this clearly in the following
comment:

Kalo had thought over a curious contradiction
of the times: while men died of hunger,
wealth grew; and while kindness dried up,
religion was more in demand. It was only
the outward form of religion, the shell of
ritual, empty within. 51

Bhattacharya never hesitates to expose the
selfish motives with which people offer worship at a
temple. For example Motichand, a rich business magnate
visits the temple with a view to consulting Chandraleka,
the young votaress there whether he should buy or sell
his shares. Not knowing what to say, Chandraleka

51 In the Rider of the Tiger, p. 113.
mechanically repeats the words "Buy... sell... buy... sell". Motichand takes it for granted that God had spoken through his oracle and shown him the way. As luck would have it, he makes a huge profit. This is how Motichand, the man with three wives, becomes a regular worshipper in the temple always praying for divine mercy to make more money.

The "Milk Bath" episode is also another revelation of the motives and mentalities of the worshippers. Kalo, institutes the rituals of "milk bath" for the idol everyday in imitation of the practice in many temples. Reservations are made and a schedule prepared as a large number of people want to become donors for they believe that by offering milk for the "Milk Bath" they could expiate all their sins and accumulate merit. It so happens that one day when no free date is available, a dying man expresses his desire to have a milk bath performed in his name so that he may die with peace of mind. The suggestion for an extra bath is ruled out as no alteration in the ritual is possible. Kalo, with all his eagerness to help the dying man personally appeals to the donors scheduled for the next few days to exchange their dates

with a dying man. They refuse. The refusal is thus recorded by the novelist.

They did not care what happened to the dying man. "He should have thought of it before", they said. "Why, any of us may die any moment". And one of them quoted a line from an old Sanskrit poem, "Life is as transient as a dewdrop on a lotus."

A few more instances to show the selfish motive of the people who come to pray in the temple and offer "Milk Bath". One day a rich man comes to the temple and expresses his desire to donate milk to perform the "Milk Bath". He says to Kalo:

I have a prayer in my heart. Let the price of gold go high and yet higher. I will make a milk bath offering to the deity now and another next month, so my wish may be fulfilled."

Within two hours another man comes with another specific prayer in his heart. He says to Kalo:

Let gold go down and down more ... Shall I have the milk spiced? Shall I have

54 Ibid., p. 123.
almond paste and sugar added? This is how I like my own cups of milk. 55

Below is given the novelist's satirical description of the people registered for milk bath.

Kalo again turned the pages of his diary and recalled other visitors. He remembered a man with his eyes peculiarly close-set who would not reveal his wish because the deity knew all, he said. Kalo felt that he was a burglar, praying for a night's good haul, with the deity as his accomplice! There was, too, a clean-shaven man in good English clothes, a high-ranking Government official who longed for promotion. He was due to retire in two years and in that time no vacancy in the higher rank could be expected. He did not explain how the god could help him, except by removing bodily the man who blocked his way. 56

To counter balance this, Bhattacharya presents a few characters who come to the temple with genuine prayers in their heart; here is an anxious mother who prays for her son's success at an examination: there is another woman whose prayer is that her husband should be cured of his fatal lung disease. The crown of all these is this: A poor peasant comes to the temple and

55 As Who Rides a Tiger, pp. 125-24
56 Ibid., p. 126.
offers five copper pieces, - which was all he could save and give - requesting Kalo to have a milk bath performed in his name. Kalo agrees for he is simply astounded by the sincerity of this poor man.

The thousands of rupees poured by rich devotees were far outweighed by the five copper pieces the heart's blood of this destitute man. 57

This reminds us of a parallel in the Bible - a poor widow casting all her saving -

And he (Jesus Christ) looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury.

And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites.

And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all:

For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God; but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had. 58

Abuse of Religion

In Music for Mohini Bhattacharya exposes

57. _The Alise & Tikem_. P. 127.
the misguided faith, superstitious beliefs which have crept into the domain of religion. Mohini, though married a year ago to Jayadev, is not blessed with a child. More than she and Jayadev, her mother-in-law becomes very anxious and is worried over this. In order to beget a son, she insists that Mohini make a vow to the Goddess in a neighbouring temple, to cut her bosom and offer blood in a lotus petal as a token of sacrifice. Mohini agrees. When she is about to make this sacrifice, Jayadev arrives and prevents her from doing so. It is quite ironic to note that Mohini is already pregnant but yet makes preparation for the sacrifice, not knowing that she is in the family way. In the same novel we see many other people taking vows or offering sacrifices for various reasons. For example Jayadev’s mother has dedicated her right hand to Shiva, as a gift for saving her son’s life from a danger, as a result of which, she is not able to use her right hand even for eating her food. Some dedicate their noses to the god and goddess for petty favours and blessings. That is why Jayadev says:

*We’re fighting ignorance and superstition, aren’t we? We’re fighting the false clay-foot gods. They’ve had their day and
now they must quit. Or else the true
gods will elude us. 59

As regards foolish faith, "the crocodile
episode" in Music for Mohini serves to illustrate
the point. In the village Behula, the crocodile, which
is supposed to inhabit a neighbouring pond is believed
to be the reincarnation of a devout brahmin, capable
of offering worship at the temple in the silent hours
of the night. And so the pond is considered very sacred.
Therefore the brahmin priest of the temple objects to
the cutting and removal of hyacinth growing on the waters
lest the devout crocodile should be offended. 60 Despite
the protest, the rebel group, headed by Jayadev and
Harindra, manages to remove the hyacinth overnight
thus exposing peoples' false faith and superstitious
belief. Harindra's victory is conveyed thus:

Harindra felt the chill in their hearts
and he gazed off toward the horizon, as
though he could see the dawn of a new
day. He smiled and spoke with a sort of
joy. "Never again shall the hyacinth grow
in Behula village. The myth of the devout
crocodile along with a hundred other myths is
dust for breezes of a passing age. We
march ahead, we progress." 61

59 Music for Mohini. p. 203.
60 Ibid., pp. 195-96
61 Ibid., p. 197.
Again Bhattacharya is pained to record in *So Many Hungers* how people misuse and even profane God’s name. For example Somendra considers war as “a god-sent opportunity” to amass wealth. And a procuress who has come to lure Kajoli to a brothel says to Kajoli’s mother: “It is God’s mercy that I have turned up.” Here is another example in *A Dream in Hawaii*, — a spiritual Guru bringing disgrace to the yellow garb he wears. Frieda’s confession goes thus:

> When I went to his hotel he took me to his room. First, he showed me how to sit in lotus-posture. Then he gave me a strong drink. He talked. He had spotted me in the lecture hall, he said, and he knew instantly by his inner sight that I was ready for the ambrosia. So... so he pulled me to bed.

The foregoing analysis clearly proves beyond any doubt that Bhattacharya has immense faith in religion because religion does help man in resolving his intra-personal tensions and in establishing a satisfactory relationship at the interpersonal level. But at the same time he cannot tolerate superstitious

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62 *So Many Hungers*, p. 31.
63 Ibid., p. 153.
64 *A Dream in Hawaii*, pp. 112-13.
beliefs, misguided faith, misuse of God's name, and empty rituals and arid pujapath. Rituals are good in so far as their meaning and significance are understood and then performed. Understanding the spirit of religion means meaningful participation and practice and therefore richer life.

Religious Tolerance

Though a Hindu, by religion, Bhattacharya preaches religious tolerance. All religions are primarily concerned with man and his well-being. And each religion has its own strength and weakness. Mrs. Indrani Mukerjee remarked on this aspect:

My father is not a religious fanatic; though a Hindu, he does respect all religions. He never considers one religion superior to another because he believes all religions are primarily for man and his well-being. 65

No wonder that Bhattacharya has allowed freedom of worship to his children. He is one who practises what he preaches. Again Indrani Mukerjee said:

65 My meeting with Mrs. Indrani Mukerjee at Calcutta dated Feb. 15, 1980.
I have been brought up in the Hindu faith; yet I don't go to the temple to pray. I go to a church nearby and pray. My father does not object to it.

Giving due respect and importance to all religions and their faiths, believing religious tolerance and goodwill, pleading for a better understanding of the spirit of religion— all these go a long way to prove Bhattacharya's forward-looking mind. He has been greatly influenced by the great Indian thinkers like the Emperor Akbar, Lord Buddha, Swami Vivekananda, Gurudev Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru. In all his eagerness to advocate this broad and liberal outlook on religion, Bhattacharya very often quotes the words of these thinkers in his works. For example, in his essay "Akbar's Universal Faith", he quotes Akbar's words to the council of theologians.

We ought, therefore, to bring them all into one, but in such a fashion that they should be both 'one' and 'all', with the great advantage of not losing what is good in any single religion.

Again in A Dream in Hawaii, Bhattacharya quotes Swami Vivekananda's words:

66 My meeting with Mrs. Indrani Kumargoe at Calcutta dated Feb. 15, 1930.

67 Nabanita Bhattacharya: "Akbar's 'Universal Faith'"

Puna Namanable Yestday (Patan: Pustak Bhandar, 1941) p. 46.
Hindu or Buddhist or Christian, let each assimilate the spirit of others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according his own law of growth. Let this be inscribed on the banner of every religion: Assimilation, not Destruction. Harmony and Peace, not Dissension...
Universal Religion must be accepted by all men while they retain their own faith and mode of worship. Diverse voices must come in one swelling chorus, one universal anthem.... Let your faith be all-embracing, not exclusive. Let your love be universal charity. Accept all faiths. Harmonise all beliefs. 68

In *Shadow from Ladakh*, with all his admiration for Santiniketan, Bhattacharya writes:

Santiniketan was meant to be home and temple in one. But there was a real temple, one of glass, open on all sides to the flooding sunlight. It was a school chapel, without altar or image... No dogmatic teaching. The poet [Tagore] believed in a world religion - he called it the Religion of Man. 69

In the same novel, Bhattacharya quotes Gandhi's words:

God dwelt not in temple or mosque or church but in the living image of mankind. 70

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68 *A Dream in Hawai*, p. 62
69 *Shadow from Ladakh*, p. 15.
Practical Religion

In conclusion we find that in his works Bhattacharya is basically a Humanist, and hence the religion he envisions is man-centred. Thus Bhattacharya presents a universal religion — to put it in Tagore's phrase "The Religion of Man" which measures all values and actions in relation to human personality and life in the here and now, embraces all faiths and beliefs, promotes dynamic equilibrium in the art of living, preaches goodwill, tolerance, love, compassion and service and has human centrality. In other words more man-centred than God-centred and more concerned with the life in the here and now Bhattacharya's religion is a practical religion — which is opposed to what is tyrannous, illiberal, formalist, dogmatic and obscurantist — embracing all the liberal, just and progressive ideas both in Indian and Western religious traditions.